

# AMBIGUITY AND EXPLICITNESS in the Text of The Greek New Testament

As an Apostolic, there are many excellent reasons for learning to read New Testament Greek. It allows one to engage thoughtfully with more technical commentaries and follow grammatical discussions. A person familiar with Greek can readily see fallacious arguments which are put forward based on Greek grammar. There are devotional benefits from reading the New Testament authors' actual words, especially when Jesus spoke those words. An individual can also see nuances in the text, such as puns, word plays, idioms, vocal rhythms, or chiasmic constructs. All these, and more, are good reasons for learning New Testament Greek. However, one particularly beneficial aspect of knowing Greek is seeing ambiguity and explicitness in the underlying New Testament text, varying levels of clarity that don't easily translate into English. That is the benefit of knowing Greek we will be discussing here.

As any bilingual person will tell you, it is not always easy to translate from one language, a source language, into a second language, a target language. Often, a one-to-one relationship does not exist between the two. Moreover, since grammatical constructs vary and the semantic range of words differs, a translation will often fail to express fully what is being said in the original. Alternatively, a translation can take on additional nuances that aren't in the original language. These variances between languages are one reason why it is often said, "The translator is a traitor."

When speaking about ambiguity and explicitness in the Greek text, it only becomes an issue if the same variance doesn't exist in English. If English has the same level of clarity as Greek, then that which is written in Greek can be translated with no addition or loss in meaning. This problem of clarity exists in two areas: a word's semantic range and an idea communicated by a grammatical construct.

Considering word meaning first, let's look at a couple of examples to show how variance between languages can add or subtract meaning from a translation. These examples are not an exhaustive examination but will give us a feel for the problem.

A significant passage for Apostolics is the new birth passage of John 3:1-8. This passage is well known for its splendid wordplays in the Greek, but the casual English reader is oblivious to what is going on under the surface. This short passage in John contains at least three Greek words with double meanings. The ambiguity that exists in the Greek is lost when the translator is required to choose a more definitive word in English. The Greek word πνεῦμα<sup>1</sup> (*pnēuma*) can mean either wind or spirit, while the word φωνή<sup>2</sup> (*phōnē*) can refer to either a noise or a voice.

So when you are born of the Spirit/wind, you will hear a voice/noise. Is this wordplay a theological necessity? Probably not. Yet a significant nuance is lost in translation. Likewise, the word for "again," as in "born again," can also mean "above." Therefore, a person is either born again or born from above. Does this shed light on Nicodemus' confusion? Is he taking the word to mean one thing while Jesus is using the term differently? Regardless of the intended meaning, the English reader doesn't have an opportunity to ask these questions of the text, being oblivious to the ambiguity in Greek.

The opposite problem occurs when a word is explicit in Greek but has no equivalent precision in English. In these cases, you will often see variant translations in the English versions of the Bible, as translators struggle to find an English word that adequately conveys the underlying Greek. For example, one word in the New Testament that is very explicit in meaning is ἑταῖρος<sup>3</sup> (*hētairōs*), referring to a person who has something in

common with others and enjoys association with them, but not necessarily at the level of affection, friendship, or love. The word ἑταῖρος is usually translated as "friend," but this is a misleading English translation as it fails to convey the specificity of the word. It also confuses it with φίλος<sup>4</sup> (*philōs*), a word usually translated as "friend," which includes the idea of affection or love. Matthew is the only New Testament author who uses this word, and in three places, he uses it to describe a binding relationship that has been betrayed. Intriguingly ἑταῖρος is used by Jesus of Judas when Judas betrayed him with a kiss (Matt 26:50). Jesus is not calling Judas an intimate friend but an associate who has broken his trust.

Another form of ambiguity in the New Testament comes from Greek grammar rather than word meaning. In this instance, the grammar is ambiguous in some way, but the translator is forced to translate it into a non-ambiguous form because English doesn't have the same vagueness. A great example of this occurs when Jesus encourages his disciples by saying, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1). As the disciples currently believed in God, Jesus encouraged them to believe in him, as well. The problem, however, is that the form of both Greek words translated as "believe" could be either indicative or imperative, as both forms are identical in Greek. The indicative verb form describes reality, while the imperative indicates an instruction or command. The translators have translated the first "believe" as an indicative and the second as an imperative. In effect, they have interpreted this verse for the reader out of necessity. The verse could just as easily be read as two instructions, "believe in God, believe in me also," or as two descriptions, "you believe in god, you also believe in me." Only context can determine the intended meaning. However, the reader doesn't know this issue exists without understanding Greek grammar.

As with word meaning, the problem of explicitness can also exist. The grammar in Greek can be explicit, yet when translating into English, there is ambiguity. A fascinating example comes from the book of Hebrews, where the author speaks of Esau's rejection. "For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears" (KJV, Heb 12:17). The ambiguity in English revolves around the antecedent of the relative pronoun "it." What is the "it" that Esau seeks? Does Esau seek the blessing, or does he seek repentance? The fantastic thing about Greek is that it has three genders and is highly inflected. Although this increases the paradigms one must memorize to master the language, it also means that the relationships between words are more explicit than in English. Relative pronouns must agree with their antecedents in number and gender. Since "it" and "blessing" are both feminine words, while "place," as in "a place of repentance," is masculine, it is evident in Greek that it is the blessing that Esau sought. Of course, if you know the story of Esau, you would probably come to the same conclusion. Esau received a blessing of sorts, but not the blessing he desired. Nonetheless, this verse exemplifies how knowing Greek grammar allows you to exegete the text more accurately and confidently.

The level of clarity in Greek is only one issue that the Bible student must deal with when studying the Bible in English, and we have only seen a fraction of that issue here. Many other concerns exist when translating Greek into English, of which an English reader may not be fully aware. Although learning to read Greek is the best option available for the Apostolic minister, it is not always possible for a person to devote the time required to master the language. If this is the case, be encouraged. There are many resources available that allow the Bible student to access the underlying Greek grammar successfully. Academic software programs such as Logos and Accordance can be beneficial, aiding with paradigms, grammar, and easy access to the best lexicons. Bill Mounce has a great book titled *Greek for the Rest of Us*, which helps understand Greek grammatical forms and word meanings without memorizing extensive paradigms and definitions. Likewise, reverse interlinears help a person quickly access the underlying Greek words and their inflected forms while reading the New Testament. The more a person familiarizes themselves with Greek, the less they are dependent on translations. Any effort to further understand the Word of God is worth the cost. <sup>†</sup>

**End Notes:**

1. BDAG, "πνεῦμα"; BDAG, "φωνή."
2. BDAG, "ἄνωθεν."
3. BDAG, "ἑταῖρος."
4. BDAG, "φίλος."
5. Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 36 of Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 533.



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